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Levinas: The Face of Otherness and the Ethics of Therapy

By Steven BINDEMAN

The face for Levinas is an opportunity for intentionally discovering affectivity, which is experienced as meaning through feeling. We thus “feel” responsible for the other when we find ourselves face-to-face with him or her. Such a confrontation discourages intellectual categorization and calls instead for an ethical commitment to preserve the uniqueness of the other. Levinas’s consequent distinction between the defining categories of the Said and the authentic experience of Saying is especially noteworthy. It will be applied here to the contrasting ways experimental and humanist psychologists approach the face and identity of the other, either as a thing to be recognized and studied, or as an occasion for transcendence.

Levinas challenges us with his question, what does the face of the other ask of us? When we are under the affect of its gaze we recognize the infinite play of complexities on its surface. The transcendence of the experience drives us to act in an ethically responsible way. We learn to substitute ourselves for the other, and his or her needs become of paramount importance to us – even replacing our own in terms of priority. What we give value too changes as well. The things we measure, like beauty, wealth, intelligence, and status, either recede into the background or disappear completely. What takes their place are the things that can’t be measured, including friendship, care, devotion, spirituality, justice, and love. According to Levinas, those who follow the agenda of measurement are the totalizers. They follow the metaphysics of ontology and develop egocentric systems of sameness around themselves. They violate their surroundings by their acts of measurement, which are also acts of violence. As Brian Schroeder puts it in his book *Alatared Ground*: “It is precisely *conceptuality* itself that is the origin of violence” (Schroeder, 1996, 1). Conceptuality as a kind of measurement violates the alterity, the unknowable difference, of the other. By reducing difference to sameness, it leads to understanding, then control, and finally violence. The horrors of war, especially those of the 20th century, can be seen as a consequence of this process. Those who follow the other path, the infinitizers, are the proponents of subjectivity. They pass through the experiences of infinity and transcendence. Their universe is decentered, rooted in a heightened awareness of the radical difference of otherness. The other is not there for me, but rather the other way around. For Levinas, I am here *for* the other. I believe that this stance is one of the most shocking, disorienting, and far-reaching ethical commitments in the entire history of philosophy. Its implications can be felt in the way we relate to community, language, politics, justice, divinity, and therapy.

This disorientation is grounded in the experience of the face-to-face relation. When the self meets the other, face-to-face, what is the nature of this confrontation? Does it entail a special kind of listening, of hearing what the other has to say, perhaps through a privileged kind of dialogue? Or does it require instead a heightened kind of seeing, of looking at the other in a certain way, differently from how one might view for example an inanimate object? The answer of course is both. Levinas asserts that seeing the face of the other is not a matter of perception. To explain his point, perception belongs to the philosophical tradition of representation (part of what he calls the Said, with its tendency to possess, appropriate, reify, and totalize) which he is trying to avoid. Instead, he is pointing to a deeper kind of experience of the face of the other, part of what he calls the Saying. The face, then, should not be reduced to its physical aspects alone. However, it is not merely a metaphor for something else, either. The face of the other is real. In fact, the face-to-face relation starts with an awareness of the physical incarnation of the face. What Levinas is asking of us is a profound reconsideration of our perception of this face. When we recognize someone, when we say we *know* him or her, we have fallen into the habit of seeing as a kind of understanding. We need to learn how to see otherwise, in order to respect, morally speaking, the singularity and otherness of the other. We need to let the absolute foreign nature of the other astonish us.

Seeing for Levinas is highly problematic. For example, the authority of the gaze is the application of theoretical consciousness onto the plane of the other. As David Michael Levin writes in his recent book *The Philosopher's Gaze*, "Seeing the other person *as* something, inevitably subjects the other to the violence of classification" (Levin, 1999, 247). For Levinas, we do not "see" the face since the face cannot be an object of knowledge. The face, rather, is a commandment to feel responsibility. The experience of the face of the other is also an opportunity for transcendence into infinity. Infinity though is forever outside the grasp of seeing. How to liberate philosophy from the domination of vision and reason may be Levinas's central dilemma. In his words, "what is needed is a thought for which the very metaphor of vision and aim is no longer legitimate" (Levinas, 1966, p. 155). Since reason demands lucidity, transparency, and visibility, it is a natural ally of light. Truth for Levinas must be located elsewhere.

For Levinas, however, language, truth, and justice are intertwined. "Truth," he writes in his early major work *Totality and Infinity* in a section entitled Rhetoric and Injustice "is produced only in veritable conversation or in justice" (TaI 71). He emphasizes in the same passage that "*We call justice this face to face approach, in conversation*" (his italics). Injustice in turn starts with rhetoric, the kind of discourse that violates the freedom of the other. Rhetoric itself cannot be the problem, however, since Levinas uses it himself, as a way of breaking through the boundaries of reason.

The problem rather is in the way that rhetoric is used. This way is found especially, he says, in “pedagogy, demagogy, and psychagogy” (TaI, 70), which are all systems of measurement and control. When ethics thus moves into the domain of politics and becomes morality, the possibility of violence appears because of the threat of the application of such absolutist forms of thought. Further, although the moral agent must remain free in order to avoid the totalizing domination of the state, morality must still be grounded in the ethical relation of the face-to-face. For Levinas justice is not an abstract notion but is found in the expression of duty and obligation discovered in the face of the other. When ethical discourse is grounded in the face to face relation so that the freedom of the other is respected and preserved, absolutist systems are thereby renounced.

Justice for Levinas is still more complicated, though. Although every face is invisible to me even when facing me, it bespeaks its kinship with all other human beings however distant from me. With this insight Levinas passes from his development of an ethics between singular persons to a theory of justice related to the idea of kinship. Present to all face-to-face relations is the addition of what he points to as a kind of “third party,” a condition that he calls “illeity.” This third party acts as a witness to the proceedings. This addition brings up the issue of social standards, and along with it a serious problem for Levinas. He somehow has to pass over from the ethically grounded specificity of the face-to-face relation to the universality of the institution of justice. Can justice be fair and impartial on the one hand, yet on the other hand still be connected to the transcendence discovered on the face of the other?

The encounter with the face is a dialogue in language grounded in ethics. “The face,” Levinas says, “is a living presence. ... The face speaks” (TaI, 66). Our encounter with the face awakens our moral conscience. It obsesses us. It also commands us to listen to its call. It thus has an immediate and powerful *presence*, which however is at the same time an absence. When Heidegger interprets a phrase from Hölderlin, “poetically man dwells,” he is talking about responding to a similar call. “Dwelling” for Heidegger suggests man’s taking his own measure against the godhead, whereby his own mortality is measured against the immortality of God. In his essay on the Hölderlin poem Heidegger introduces two different kinds of measurement. The first is the measuring of science, which with a palpable stick or rod clutches at standards. The other is the measuring of poetry, which through a concentrated perception or gathering takes in the standard but remains a kind of listening. (See Heidegger, 1971, 223.) For Levinas the presence of the face speaks forth similarly in what he calls Substitution, the relationship of one *for* the other, in the non-presence of the infinite, through the call of responsibility. He clarifies this point in the following way: “This response answers, before any understanding, for a debt contracted before any freedom and before any

consciousness and any present, but it does answer, as though the invisible that bypasses the present left a trace by the very fact of bypassing the present" (OB 11-12).

Levinas's description of the face as a presence that is also an absence, what he calls the *trace*, is an example of his ongoing struggle with language whereby he tries to say more than what can be merely said. Since the entire history of western philosophy is permeated with the language of ontology, Levinas's focus on experience outside this realm faces constant difficulties with articulation. This explains the title of his second and last major work: *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. When he speaks of "the invisible that bypasses the present" he is referring to God. Since his theology is a negative theology, however, this means that he believes that nothing positive can be known about God, who has nothing in common with any other being. His problem can also be explained in terms of the quest of phenomenology, which is the attempt to gain access to the originary or lived experience. Since all lived experience takes place within the constant shifting of time's passing, its fluid texture is forever beyond the grasp of conceptuality. A similar problem exists with poetry, as the poet Charles Simic indicated in a recent article [from *The New York Review of Books*, July 19, 2001, pp. 34-36] entitled "That Elusive Something." "Paradoxically," Simic wrote, "what is most important in a poem, that *something* for which we go back to it again and again, cannot be articulated. The best one can do under the circumstances is to give the reader a hint of what one has experienced reading the poem, but was unable to name. ...Poetry's strength lies in its endless elusiveness to the intellect." Levinas's constant use of rhetorical and poetic devices, even within the architecture of phenomenology – despite his criticism of them elsewhere -- can thus be explained in terms of the elusiveness yet constancy of his choice of subject matter. Although the domain of Levinas's philosophical efforts shifted over its course from ethics to theology, his focus throughout remained fixed on the elusive face-to-face experience.

Levinas's ethics, thus grounded in the originary experience of the face as a living presence, is an *embodied* ethics. The call of the other to feel responsibility for him or her takes hold of our flesh, affecting our gestures, and our listening, looking and seeing as well. This call is not to be understood through an intellectual or cognitive act, though; rather it is something to be *felt*. We *feel* the presence of the other through the experience of the face-to-face, and this felt experience has real meaning for us. The ethical subject is not determined by its freedom and autonomy (as it is in liberal humanism) but by being subjected to and attentive to this call. Freedom is for the other, not for oneself. As Levinas writes: "the Good is not presented to freedom; it has chosen me before I have chosen it. No one is good voluntarily" (OB 15). His ethics is not therefore based on the rights and responsibilities of a person with free will using rational principles, but on an embodied dimension that is prior to this. It is a response

to a call that it is not yet heard by the ego. Although incomprehensible, befalling us from beyond essence, this call is still real. Levinas is referring, in his own words, to “a reason before the beginning, before any present, because my responsibility for the other commands me before any decision, before any deliberation” (OB 166).

The ego is not yet able to hear the call of the other because the ego is attached to a mask. “Prior to the play of being,” says Levinas, “before the present, older than the time of consciousness that is accessible in memory . . . the oneself is exposed as hypostasis, of which the being it is as an entity is but a mask.” The “I,” he continues, is at first a “no one, clothed with purely borrowed being, which masks its nameless singularity by conferring on it a role” (OB, 106). We discover our true moral self only by tearing off this mask and exposing our face to the face of the other. The mask we tear off is our socialized, artificially constructed identity, which gave us our name and protected us from disorientation and loss of self. However, it is only in this state of embodied vulnerability, beyond ego, that we are attentive to the other’s call.

The call of the other is disruptive. It disintegrates egological identity and leaves it with nothing more than a nameless ipseity. It calls into question the intentionality and primacy of consciousness. It uproots the self from history and undermines its sense of freedom. It leaves the self instead within an ethically grounded universe of obligation that is unending in its demands and asymmetrical in character. This means that the ethical demand to be good and just is not contingent on the other’s reciprocity. Yet for Levinas, only this disinterested selflessness is “what is better than being, that is, the Good” (OB, 19).

Levinas’s work is disruptive in another sense, too. It disrupts the movement towards certainty of the modern European philosophical tradition. This movement gives precedence to the atemporal mode of presence, since presence is what enables knowledge to take shape through the process of philosophical analysis. This quest for knowledge assumes that everything that is other (object, thing, or being) is in principle accessible or reducible to theoretical contemplation. Heidegger uses the term “presencing” to call attention to the need to emphasize in contrast the key role temporality plays in consciousness. With this term he refers to the event of appropriation whereby truth as unconcealment comes into the clearing opened up by the experience of authenticity. Authenticity in turn is discovered either through the exploration of certain artworks or with the increased awareness of one’s own mortality. Within authenticity, one’s personal time slows down. Presencing is being *as* time, or temporal coming-about (like in the unfolding of a cubist portrait where the identity of the subject is refracted and hidden), but presencing almost unnoticeably becomes “something present” when it is named or represented. The modernist reification and

totalization of presencing, found most noticeably in modern technology, is violent, anxiety driven, and defensive. As Levinas puts it, knowledge is what reduces the other to the same (see Levinas, 1966, p. 151). That which is both agent and container for this transmutation (or what could also be called the shift from difference to identity) is variously called by the tradition ego, self, consciousness, mind, or Dasein. Its end result is nothing more than the reiteration of what one already knows, where nothing new, nor other, nor strange, nor transcendent, can appear or affect someone. Levinas attempts in its stead to develop a kind of alternative phenomenology based on the experience of transcendence, which, as a trace of the infinite, is discovered through the infinite variability on the face of the other within the face-to-face relation.

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